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ABSTRACT

An 11-step process may be used by freshman composition students to help them write effective prose in a series of clear steps. The steps are: (1) select a topic (for the first assignment, usually a place about which students have strong feelings and vivid remembrances), (2) individually brainstorm the topic, (3) categorize the details that have emerged, (4) narrow the topic, (5) brainstorm the narrowed topic, (6) sort out the new set of details into subsets, (7) provide more information about scantily described details and then make the descriptions as specific as possible, (8) decide on a point of view about the narrowed topic, (9) select an order (preferably a climactic order) for the subsets into which the details have been arranged, (10) make the order clear through the use of transitions, and (11) write the first draft nonstop without worrying about "pettyfogging" details. This same process can be used for writing critical literary essays. To discourage inflated prose and to relieve writer's block, teachers may use letters--which students actually mail to chosen correspondents--as the form for writing. Finally, to provide constructive editing for the volume of papers students should write, teachers may have students evaluate each other's papers and may simplify their own copyediting procedures. (GT)

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LETTER WRITING: A TECHNIQUE FOR TREATING WRITER'S BLOCK

Priscilla Sears

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This paper is not quite as advertized: "Letter Writing: A Technique for Treating Writer's Block." It is an account of my current responses to four of the perennial questions that we who teach freshman composition must answer--including those about writer's block. The questions are:

1) How can I enable my students to write effective prose in a series of clear steps?
2) How can I read and constructively edit the volume of writing that I think the students need to do?
3) What can I do to discourage the inflated, upholstered prose that the students tend to believe is wanted by the terrorist who is the teacher?
4) How shall I relieve the writer's block--that is sometimes a classwide problem?

I offer these personal answers in the spirit exemplified by this anecdote.

A busy King, harried by royal fol de rol, wanted to learn all there was to know. The King, however, was always busy to the second power--forever stirring.

And so he sent for the wisemen of the kingdom, and charged them with condensing all the world's knowledge so that he could learn it quickly.

They returned in six months with three volumes, but the bustling King explained that he was as busy as all get out and they would have to do better. They returned with a ten page memorandum. The King was still dissatisfied.

And so the wisemen finally distilled all the world's knowledge into one word. The King was mightily pleased. "What is that one word, Wisemen?"

That word, Your Highness, is "maybe."

It may be that these answers to the questions about writing as process, about efficient,constructive editing, writer's bloat and writer's block will be applicable to your freshman composition courses.

It may be that the process and practices will be most applicable to situations which approximate those of the seed bed out of which these ideas grew. At Dartmouth the introductory writing course is also the introductory literature course. We are required to make "fit audience but few" for Paradise Lost, a Shakespeare play, and representative selection of American literature, about which the students are to write 12,000 words --all in nine or ten weeks. (You may notice that I talk at machine gun speed: the word per minute rate may be indicative of the pace at which we must move in order to accomplish one half of the goals of the course.)

PART I
"How Can I Enable My Students to Write Effective Prose According to a Clear Series of Steps?"

The approach that I use in all of my introductory writing courses is rather like a formula. Although I have serious reservations about tne Five Easy Steps to Everything You Ever Wanted to Know or Be modality, the eleven step process that I describe and

demonstrate at the beginning of freshman compositions seems to work. The quaking freshmen are relieved to learn that writing is a process that he/she can practice, rather than a gift that must be inherited, or for which you must invoke the muse. (Some have tried contacting the celestial patroness, 'Sing Heavenly Muse,' but two mile jogs are more productive.)

For the first assignment I usually ask them to write a descriptive essay of six to ten paragraphs, usually about a place about which they have strong feelings and vivid remembrances, since "a cold resolve begets nothing." I also ask them to select a place about which they can be honest: since there is often some conflict between passion and honesty. I do all parts of the assignment also, and this serves not only to provide iillustrative material, but also to enable us to become acquainted and to initiate a sense of trust and collective purpose that seems critical to effective writing. (It also serves to kindle my empathy--I don't want to forget how hard it is to write well.)

Students will often complain that they can't think of anything to say about Aunt Hattie's farm or the weight room or the cabin on the lake or their canoeing on the Connecticut, or that they don't want to tell you about Fred's ford or the summer of '76. With regard to the latter, I assure them that I am not requiring a sort of confessional gush, not ids and odds, nor will I violate their right to privacy or confidentiality, and that I know of no good writing that is not informed by strong feeling. For the hard core

case, and sometimes I have a classful, who seem unable to say anything because they cannot observe, they can't see unless it is to repeat what someone else has said they have seen--when they don't know "that if one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud--something like revelation takes place " [as May Sarton says], I provide a flower or an animal or ask for some beloved object of theirs and we observe it directly, silently, originally for ten minutes and then bounce words off of it to determine which ones stick; that is, we try to establish an original relationship with it.

(You may remember the writing class in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance in which a student who originally proposes a five hundred word essay on the U.S. is finally advised to write on the Opera House on the Main Street of Bozeman beginning with the upper left hand brick. Or of the class in which the teacher has everyone write for one hour about the back of his or her thumb.)

Once they have a general topic, say their family's farmhouse, I then have them brainstorm the topic, in class, for ten minutes or so, urging them to note their knee-jerk reactions, no matter how absurd or disgusting or ostensibly unrelated. I tell them to see what their subconscious will wash up onto the shore of their conscious mind. Setting the juices flowing takes some practice: students are dubious--reluctant--sometimes embarrassed about such irrational procedures. I quote Richard Wilbur "As a queen sits down, knowing the chair will be there/ Or a general raises his hand and is given the field glasses // Step off into the blank of your own mind // Something will [surely] come to you."

Next I tell them to analyze their list of details to determine what categories the details can be sorted into: and they always find that the shreds and patches and bits and pieces are related somehow. The ostensible hugger muggery contains structure. The details about the family farmhouse kitchen may be sorted into categories of: inside; outside the window; memories; food; decoration; etc.

In most cases the original subjects are broad enough for six volumes over twelve years, and a new narrowed topic must be selected from the categories into which the original material is sorted.

Thus far they've:

1) selected the topic
2) brainstormed it
3) categorized the details that they've coughed up
4) narrowed the topic.

The fifth step is to brainstorm the new, narrowed topic.

The sixth consists of again sorting out the new set of details into categories--into subsets.

The seventh, two-part step, marks the beginning of the processing of the raw material, and concerns clarity: the hare has been caught--now to cook it. I tell students:

a) to provide more information about scantily described details, on their list of knee-jerk reactions; and,
b) to make the descriptions as specific as possible.

The eighth step involves deciding on a point about the narrowed topic, which is, of course implicit in the details: "Is your point that the kitchen in the family farmhouse is full of the bounty of life--good food and fond memories and beloved people, or that as a child it reminded you of your poverty and hopelessness and misery? Was it a pest hole of cockroaches, garbage, grease spots, and the smell of boiled cabbage?" Details which do not develop the point must be eliminated or justified.

The ninth step is to select an order for the subsets into which the details have been arranged: I recommend, of course, that the order be climactic, and that they save their heavy artillery for last.

As the tenth step I note their responsibility to make the order clear to the reader through the use of transitions, using my essay for illustration as we do at each stage.

The eleventh step is to write the first draft--non stop--witnout worrying about pettyfogging details. I tell them not to ponder and fret. I tell them not to worry about spelling, punctuation, first or final paragraphs. That can be part of the proofreading for specific features that is the final step before the final draft. (I require that they submit the first draft as well as the brainstorming list with the final draft.)

This same process can be used, of course, for other expository essays. The second, and all subsequent essays in this introductory course, must be critical papers about Shakespeare and Paradise Lost, and the principal adjustment I note is that for this paper the cate-

gories into which they can sort their reactions are provided: plot, theme, image, irony, character, etc.

If I have an apt class I may require that they either publish one of their essays, often the personal essay, or show me three rejection slips.

My answer to the third and fourth questions about writer's block and what I call writer's bloat, that is, "What can I do to discourage inflated prose?" and "How shall I relieve writer's block?" is to use letters as the form in which students are asked to write. (Keats and Flaubert aside, letters are not primarily a literary form, of course, but you can use an essay form in letters.) I have used this technique primarily with classes in which most of the students were terrified by the prospect of being evaluated by that inscrutable, merciless tyrant, the college professor. These classes were cases of collective writer's block,and they manifested the classic syndrome:

1) the most upholstered and overstuffed and obfuscating diction and a syntax nearly as convoluted as Milton's, and
2) the most imitative content, and
3) plagiarism.

Obviously the students know that I, the aforementioned terrorist, as well as the correspondent, will read the letters the students write, but the effects are beneficial nonetheless. I seldom have a student write: "Frenetic foibles of threefold magnitude came of his earnest angst which he learned from experiential reality," or other such adjective-clotted prose. The letters, which I require

that they send, are free of deadwood--what Sylvan Barnet and Marcia Stubbs call "Freshman Omniscience": stuffing sentences, padding paragraphs, and stretching points. In general they are more original, clearer, more concise. And more honest. The responses to their letters are sometimes instructive. In most cases the students tell the reader that they had been required to select a person they respected and trusted as the recipient for a series of letters they have to write about literature. The correspondent, usually a friend, twice a mother, would often write back with perceptive critiques of both the content and form.

My theory was, of course, that if the students could imagine an audience that wouldn't weild the red pen like a sword, they could write more effectively, which they did in most cases. This success gives them a measure of the confidence necessary to relieve writer's block.

My response to the question about trying to critique too many papers is to teach the students to copyedit and then have them read all of the other papers in the class--or to divide the class into groups of three or four and have the students evaluate all papers from within their group. If possible, I critique all the papers; if not, I critique six or seven of the students' choice during a ten week term.

This procedure has benefits other than reducing the volume of papers I must read.

First, this audience, like the correspondent, is more real than the teacher who must certainly already know everything that you the student could say about Othello--or anything else for that matter.

Secondly, the writer has more responses to his or her work--more opportunity to learn; and the reader, too, has the chance to learn how to become a more sensitive and critical reader.

Students must agree, of course, not to discuss the papers outside of the group, and a sense of community, a sense of responsibility towards other members of the group, a sense of collective purpose, and one of trust is established. This also discourages the bloat and block problems.

My second answer to "How am I ever going to get through all these papers before the millennium" is to make adjustments in my own copyediting after I've corrected the first few sets of papers. Instead of identifying strengths and weaknesses with notations like "Bravo!", "PC," or "Ah!" or "Awk! Awk!" I simply underline the strength or weakness with a magic marker. In order to revise, (and I require that all papers be revised), the student must both identify liabilities and assets and either retain, amplify, or correct.

These are, of course, what one of my colleagues calls "semi-demi answers." There is always the student who got away: and inevitably some ugly little fact comes along to threaten my beautiful hypothesis. But it may be, and I hope it will be, that these practices will contribute to the dynamics of your answering process.